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This book is the first of a new series, ‘LautSchriftSprache / ScriptandSound’, focusing on the field of graphemics (the study of writing systems), in particular historical graphemics. As the traditional view of writing as (merely) a way of representing speech has given way to a more nuanced understanding of writing as a different, rather than secondary, means of communication, graphemics has become an increasingly popular field; it is also necessarily an interdisciplinary field, since it incorporates the study not only of written texts’ linguistic features, but also broader aspects such as their visual features, material supports, and contexts of production and reading. A series dedicated to the study of graphemics across multiple academic disciplines is therefore a very welcome development.

This first volume presents twenty-one papers from the third ‘LautSchriftSprache’ conference, held in Verona in 2013. In their introduction, the editors stress that the aim is to present studies of writing systems with as wide a scope as possible in terms of location, chronology, writing support, cultural context, and function. The contributions represent an impressive chronological and geographical range, from the 2nd millennium BCE to the 20th century CE and from the Middle East and Caucasus to Iceland, with the writing systems under discussion including Mesopotamian and Hittite cuneiform; Luwian Hieroglyphs; Linear A and B; runes; and the alphabets used for writing ancient Greek, various Italic and Anatolian languages, medieval Italian dialects, Old and Middle High German, Icelandic, and Ossetic. It would have been welcome to see some chapters focusing on writing systems from outside of Europe and the Middle East, particularly the independently-created writing systems of China and Mesoamerica; it is to be hoped that future volumes in the series will also cover writing systems from these and other areas of the world.

The editors set out the main themes of the conference from which this book is derived as follows: analysing readers’/writers’ conceptions of linguistic and
graphemic concepts; considering how far the concept of a ‘perfect fit’ (i.e. an exact correspondence) between written signs and linguistic content is valid and useful; and incorporating different levels of analysis, especially focusing on issues relating to the transmission of writing systems and variation within and among these systems. The book presents a wide range of levels of analysis, from studies of individual script signs (e.g. Raschellà, Waxenberger), to discussions of systemic issues in the creation of particular writing systems (e.g. Bernard, Marinetti & Solinas), to theoretical or historical perspectives on the relationship between writing and culture (e.g. Tomelleri, Waldispühl).

What the introduction to this volume lacks, however, is a broader theoretical or methodological discussion of the book’s potential interdisciplinary impact: how developing methodological approaches to or studying particular aspects of one writing system may help to illuminate others. Similarly, although the volume’s title implies a focus on ‘variation’, this is only mentioned briefly, without any discussion of what kinds of variation might be meant (e.g. individual, chronological, geographical, generic) or why this issue may be a particularly important one for graphemics (e.g. its potential to shed light on writing systems’ developments over time, or on the effect of different contexts and purposes of writing on the form of texts, or on the habits of individual writers). Only around half of the contributions specifically discuss variation within writing systems (Busse, Collins, Kazzazi, Pellegrini, Poccetti, Raschellà, Solling) or between different systems (Bernard, Marinetti & Solinas): the volume’s sub-title, ‘Concepts and methods in the analysis of ancient written documents’, more accurately reflects its fairly broad focus. In addition, despite the volume’s potential to attract readers from disparate backgrounds, individual chapters’ level of accessibility to non-specialists varies considerably: those by Bernard, Marinetti & Solinas, Payne, Pellegrini, Poccetti, and Rizza, in particular, could have been made more accessible to readers from other disciplines by including more introductory background information, illustrations of the writing systems, signs, or inscriptions under discussion, and/or translations of quoted texts.

As it is not possible to discuss every chapter individually in this review, I shall now focus on three selected chapters, dealing with three of the overall themes mentioned in the introduction: variation within a single script (Busse), the adaptation and creation of scripts (Bernard), and the concept of a ‘perfect fit’ between script and language (Consani).

Busse’s chapter on graphic variation in Hittite cuneiform (a logosyllabary) is divided into two sections: the first offers a detailed description and examples of various different types of scribal errors (e.g. omitting signs, adding extra signs, or replacing the intended signs with graphically or phonetically similar ones), while the second provides examples of scribes deliberately deviating from the usual writing conventions and the motivations behind these choices. These include simplification for economy in writing; adding extra signs for disambiguation; and extending signs’ valency, e.g. by using Sumerian or Akkadian logograms to denote a Hittite sound-value. Busse’s overall point that not all deviations from standard writing practices should necessarily be classed as ‘errors’ and her focus on the choices of individual writers are both important issues, and ones which could be applied to other writing systems, though Busse does not explore the possible wider implications. This chapter could also have more explicitly addressed the methodology behind
identifying a feature as an error or a deliberate deviation, since in practice this may often be difficult when dealing with ancient texts whose language and/or script are now imperfectly understood.

Bernard’s chapter deals with the origins of the alphabets used to write several ancient Anatolian languages (Phrygian, Lydian, Carian, Lycian, and Sidetic), specifically with the question of whether they were adapted from the Greek alphabet or from a Semitic script (e.g. Phoenician). As mentioned above, her introduction (which describes the Greek alphabet’s creation from Phoenician and the characteristics of these Anatolian alphabets) would benefit from providing more background information, as well as illustrations of the various alphabets, for non-specialist readers. Bernard then sets out the arguments for a Greek or Semitic origin for each Anatolian alphabet (e.g. chronology, cultural and linguistic contacts, and structural, formal, and phonological correspondences between the scripts); her emphasis on the complexity of the linguistic and cultural situation of ancient Anatolia and the possibility of multiple influences on individual writing systems is particularly welcome. However, her conclusion that although the Phrygian alphabet was adapted from Greek, others (e.g. Carian and Sidetic) were created directly from Semitic scripts, is ultimately unconvincing: it relies on assuming that these scripts’ systems of vowel notation (which are structurally extremely similar: 40-42) were developed independently, a hypothesis which seems improbable in itself and for which the use of *matres lectionis* in Phoenician and the occasional omission of vowel signs in Carian inscriptions do not seem sufficient evidence. Bernard’s hypothesis also does not take into account the non-linguistic factors which may influence processes of script adaptation: the Anatolian alphabets’ varying degrees of similarity to Greek may well be (at least partly) due to differing sociocultural factors (cf. Marinetti & Solinas on such factors’ effects on Italic alphabets).

Consani’s chapter discusses the concept of a ‘perfect fit’ between language and writing – i.e. the exact representation of linguistic content by script signs – with reference to the Linear B writing system. It is frequently stated that Linear B is ‘inadequate’ for representing the Mycenaean Greek language: the script is a syllabary whose signs all stand for open syllables (whereas Greek has many consonant clusters and word-final consonants), and does not systematically distinguish some Greek phonemic features. Consani’s counter-argument, that the ‘adequacy’ of a script should be judged by its actual use (in this case, within the Mycenaean palace administrations), and that Linear B shows evidence of deliberate developmental choices by its writers in that context, is a valuable one, providing a reminder that many non-linguistic factors affect writing systems’ structure and use; however, the details of this chapter often fail to support this overall argument. For instance, although some Linear B signs undoubtedly were created within a Greek linguistic context, the specific processes of creation which Consani suggests for some signs (95) are unconvincing: there is little discussion of the practical use of the spelling conventions used to represent Greek linguistic features in Linear B; and Consani’s own remarks in the conclusion (101) imply that Linear B is less ‘sophisticated’ than the related Cypriot Syllabary due to the latter’s wider range of uses – a view which seems at odds with his earlier demonstration of the sophisticated ways in which scribes used Linear B, particularly its ideographic component, in their administrative work. If anything, the Cypriot Syllabary demonstrates that Linear B’s restriction to administrative documents was a choice on the part of its writers, not imposed by any structural ‘inadequacy’ of the writing
system.

Overall, individual chapters in this volume will be of significant interest to scholars working in the same specialist area, and many raise important methodological points which could also be applied to the study of other writing systems – but relatively few contributions explicitly discuss the potential broader impact of their methods or conclusions, and this, combined with the similar lack of methodological or theoretical discussion in the introduction, as well as the relative inaccessibility of some chapters to non-specialists, may limit the extent of their interdisciplinary impact. However, the foundation of this ‘LautSchriftSprache / ScriptandSound’ series is a significant development in promoting interdisciplinary work in historical graphemics, and subsequent volumes in the series will undoubtedly contribute further to progress in this field.

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Notes:

1. As stressed in this volume by, e.g., Consani (pp.89-91) and Marazzi (pp.115-24).
2. Although Marazzi’s chapter ‘Die Sprache der Schrift’ includes some mentions of Mayan glyphs and Aztec codices as examples in a theoretical discussion.

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